

THE CHURCHES AND THE NEW WORLD

By
ARCHIBALD ROBERTSON, M.A.

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THE
THINKER'S
FORUM

THE MODERN WORLD

There are many difficult problems facing thoughtful people at the present day—problems of which their fathers and grand-fathers knew nothing. Emotionally minded folk often try to solve these modern problems by appealing to the irrational feelings that sometimes surge up within most of us. Yet, if we think things over calmly, it becomes obvious that what is needed in this twentieth century of our era is not more unrestrained emotion but more quiet reasonableness. Wars, revolutions, and violent changes are fundamentally irrational processes, and if we want to help in creating a new world order free from these upheavals we must cultivate the arts of reason.

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and its Background," etc.*

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THE CHURCHES AND THE NEW WORLD

I.—PROTESTANT CHRISTIANITY TO-DAY

ON January 4, 1943, there was published in the Press a remarkable statement in the names of Dr. William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Rev. J. S. Whale, Moderator of the Free Church Federal Council. The statement is put forward as an answer—not indeed binding on the Anglican or Free Churches, but deserving at least the respect due to the names of its distinguished signatories—to the question of what constitutes Christianity.

The need for such an answer has long been apparent. With the Catholic Church, it is true, we know where we are. Catholic Christianity stands or falls by the letter of the historic creeds, the decrees of its General Councils, and the infallible definitions drawn up by the Papacy. If these are at variance with modern knowledge and repugnant to modern civilization, so much the worse for modern knowledge and modern civilization. The Catholic Church, strong in the support of the illiterate peasant masses of Southern Europe and Latin America and of those powerful business interests whom it pays to keep them ignorant and docile, can afford to sit tight. But with Protestant Christianity we do not know where we are. Protestantism originated in a revolt—the revolutionary uprising of the merchant capitalists of the sixteenth century against feudal exploitation by the Catholic hierarchy. Living before the rise of modern science, the Reformers used the intellectual weapon readiest to hand—the private interpretation of the Bible.

To-day, however, we have got far beyond all that. The religion established by stout Elizabethan squires and merchant adventurers no longer carries conviction to peoples whose industrial and commercial life is founded on science, and whose relations with Asiatic, African, and Polynesian cultures have acquainted them with mythologies as irrational and as implicitly believed as that of the Bible. The bulk of educated Britons

cling to the Protestantism of their forefathers not from a living conviction of its truth, but from a fear of the possible effect of Freethought on the social order.

The Protestant Churches have long ceased to direct opinion, or even (except in the case of the Church of England when her establishment or endowments are in question) to present a united front. A dwindling number of clergy stand immovably by the principles of the Reformation. More seek to magnify their office by reviving medieval ritual and dogma. Others essay the ingenious but impossible task of reconciling the creed of the Church with scientific discovery and Biblical criticism. Meanwhile the British governing class does lip-service to Christianity, supports the Churches as institutions, subsidizes religious education out of the rates and taxes, and does not scruple to vilify and persecute under the Blasphemy Laws any obscure individual who dares to preach to the masses in their own language the secular principles on which their Christian masters habitually act. In the circumstances we cannot wonder if the question is frequently asked what this Christianity is for which we are alleged to be fighting, which is conceived to be an essential ingredient in the education of the nation's children, and to attack which in unguarded language is an offence at common law.

The statement drawn up by Dr. Temple and Dr. Whale sets out to answer this question. It consists firstly of a short statement of "background," and secondly of a *credo* in four sections, dealing respectively with the relation between God and man; the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ; the activity of the Holy Spirit in mankind generally and in the Church; and the bearing of these beliefs on human action. The whole may be summarized as follows :—

1. "The world exists by the righteous will of the living God," the "creator and ruler of all things," and is "the sphere in which his eternal purpose of love is being wrought out." Men are "free personal beings able to choose good or evil," good being "a right relation" of "obedience and trust" to God and "love" to one another. Somehow (the cause of the lapse is not stated) the "historical process" has "gone wrong," and man from birth is prone to choose evil. Indeed, "he cannot by his own effort set

himself free " from this " curse." So God personally undertakes his redemption.

2. To do this, " God the Son " (the nature of sonship in a Divine being is not stated) " became man, perfectly human, yet without sin or self-centredness." The life of Christ recorded in the Gospels is " a final disclosure of what God is and of the eternal purpose of righteousness which he is working out in history." His death shows " the meaning and measure of man's sin," " the cost of our sin to God," and " the eternal love of God which is willing to bear that cost," and it declares " God's forgiveness to those who repent and believe; that is, to those who give up their selfish outlook and receive the forgiveness which God freely offers." " God set his seal upon this life and death of perfect obedience and perfect love by raising Jesus Christ from the dead, establishing within the corporate life of sinful humanity a creative centre of righteousness, and making altogether new spiritual possibilities for men living in this world."

3. God as Spirit speaks to men " in all ages through their consciences and most specially through the prophets of Israel," but is " known in all his fulness " only in the experience of " the fellowship of Christ's disciples," i.e. the Church. " Though God's redeeming action embraces all humanity and will not disclose its full meaning until its victory is universal, the high ends of his kingdom are nevertheless realized sacramentally here and now and made visible in the life of the Church."

4. Pending this " universal victory," which can be achieved only in eternal life beyond the grave, it is our duty to " seek first God's kingdom and his justice, not our own interest or comfort, and try to make love of our neighbour the rule of all our actions." This can be done effectively only " within the redeemed order," i.e. (as the preceding sections indicate) in the Church. " In short, the creative centre of our effective moral action is the redeeming act of God, who was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself."

To realize how much this statement by two eminent Church leaders is an advance and how much a retrogression, it is interesting to compare it with that famous embodiment of sixteenth-century Anglicanism, the Thirty-nine Articles. The framers of the

Articles had not the wide sympathy and social conscience which distinguish the present Archbishop of Canterbury and some of his colleagues. They were belligerent, dogmatic, and intolerant. But they had the courage of their convictions, and they could think. On comparing the two manifestoes it will be found that while the twentieth-century statement is animated by a more humane spirit, the sixteenth-century Articles have an immeasurable advantage in clarity, consistency, and downrightness.

The Articles, for example, assert uncompromisingly the doctrines of the Trinity, the virgin birth and physical resurrection of Christ, the "wrath and damnation" incurred by original sin, justification by faith only, predestination, exclusive salvation by the name of Christ, baptismal regeneration, and vicarious atonement. On all these issues the present statement is either ambiguous or silent.

Do the Archbishop and the Moderator believe, or do they not believe, that in the unity of the Godhead there are "three Persons, of one substance, power, and eternity"? We do not know; we are told of "God the Son" and "God as Spirit," but we are not told what these phrases connote; and without definition they are meaningless sounds.

Do the Archbishop and the Moderator believe, or do they not believe, that Jesus was born of a virgin? We do not know; we are told of "the great act of the Incarnation"; but the authors seem to fight shy of the barbaric superstition which demands a virgin birth as its medium.

Do the Archbishop and the Moderator believe, or do they not believe, that Christ "took again his body, with flesh, bones, and all things appertaining to the perfection of Man's nature; wherewith he ascended into Heaven, and there sitteth, until he return to judge all men at the last day"? We do not know; we are told that God raised him from the dead, and we hear of a "universal victory" hereafter, but the empty tomb, the physical ascension, and the physical return have been quietly dropped.

Do the Archbishop and the Moderator believe, or do they not believe, that "original or birth-sin . . . in every person born into this world . . . deserveth God's wrath and damna-

tion"? We do not know; we are told in one place that God "makes men free personal beings able to choose good or evil," and immediately afterwards that for some unstated reason (Adam and his apple being no longer considered admissible evidence) man "cannot by his own effort" overcome his proclivity to choose evil.

Do the Archbishop and the Moderator believe, or do they not believe; that "we are justified by faith only," and that works done from any other motive "have the nature of sin"? We are not told; but it seems they do not, for that curmudgeonly dogma is hard to reconcile with the view that conscience in all ages is the voice of God.

Do the Archbishop and the Moderator believe, or do they not believe, that God before the creation predestined some, but not others, to everlasting salvation? It seems not, for how in that case could they be "free personal beings"?

Do the Archbishop and the Moderator believe, or do they not believe, that men can be saved only by the name of Christ? Apparently not; the dogma of exclusive salvation is toned down to a modest statement that God is "known in all his fulness" only by Christians; and we are assured that "God's redeeming action embraces all humanity."

Do the Archbishop and the Moderator believe, or do they not believe, that baptism improves the chances of going to heaven? They are silent.

Do they believe, or do they not believe, that the crucifixion of Jesus was a "redemption, propitiation, and satisfaction for all the sins of the whole world"? They do not say so; they avoid the issue by vague phrases about "the cost of our sin to God" and "the eternal love of God which is willing to bear that cost."

It may be urged that it is unfair to compare a summary statement of belief such as this with a comprehensive statement such as the Thirty-nine Articles, and that even if the Archbishop can be held to be bound by an Anglican formulary, the Moderator of the Free Church Federal Council cannot. In reply to the first objection, I would observe that I have quoted only the salient points of the Articles for the purpose of the present comparison, and that all these points, except perhaps the first, have in-

disputable Scriptural support. In reply to the second objection, I would observe that I have confined attention to those points on which the Puritan party of the sixteenth century were in accord with the Anglican hierarchy of their day. The questions of Church ritual and government, which led to disruption in the following century and are responsible for the fact that the Free Churches are outside the Anglican communion to-day, are not here at issue.

It appears, therefore, that Protestant Christianity to-day, to judge by the statement of these two distinguished leaders, has considerably watered down the beliefs held binding on English Churchmen in the reign of Elizabeth. The doctrine of the Trinity has become blurred. The virgin birth is put in the background. The physical resurrection and ascension and the catastrophic end of the world are slurred over. Damnation has grown shamefaced. Faith has almost ceased to be a cardinal virtue. Predestination is a painful subject. Salvation is no longer exclusive. Baptism is an interesting social occasion. Vicarious atonement is meaningless. The Christian message is reduced to the claim that the difficult business of living is made somewhat less difficult if we belong to a Church, and that the truth, in some recondite sense, of the Church's creed is proved by the efficacy of the Church as an aid to life.

Is this claim borne out by the facts of history, past and present? We shall see.

II.—MAN AND THE UNIVERSE

WHAT ground is there for thinking that "the world exists by the righteous will of the living God"? We may really omit the word "living"—since no one, so far as I know, imagines the world to exist by the will of a dead God—and re-word the question: What ground is there for thinking that the world exists by the will of any God, or that, if he exists, he is righteous?

It is argued that the world must have had a beginning and a cause. No proof of this has been or can be given. Certain of the older generation of physicists, notably Sir James Jeans and Sir Arthur Eddington, infer from the second law of thermodynamics

that the world is "running down," and conclude that it must originally have been "wound up." To all such speculations W. K. Clifford in his Lecture, *The First and the Last Catastrophe*, delivered in 1874, gives a still valid answer. He points out that all such would-be-scientific doctrines about the beginning of things depend on mathematical equations based on observed laws. These observations and equations have enabled scientists to reconstruct the past history of the earth with an exceedingly high degree of probability. But because we can infer that the earth and, we may add, the solar system had a beginning, it does not follow that we can infer that the universe as a whole had a beginning. To do that, we should need to be sure that the known laws of geometry and mechanics were and always had been exactly and absolutely true. Such certainty is unattainable. Our knowledge of these laws is founded on experience and does not exclude the possibility of its being inexact. Clifford concludes that those who argue from observed laws of nature to a beginning of the universe are assuming something of which they know nothing at all.

Even if it were granted that the world must have a cause, it would not follow that the cause must be a God. Sir James Jeans' argument that the universe, since it exhibits mathematical laws, must have been created by a mathematician reminds us of Dr. Johnson's burlesque line: "Who drives fat oxen should himself be fat." The conformity between the calculations of a mathematician and the behaviour of material bodies ceases to astonish us if we remember that the human brain is a product of evolution, and that a brain which calculates correctly has a certain survival value in the struggle for existence as against brains which calculate incorrectly or not at all.

But even if we granted the arguments of Jeans and Eddington and agreed that the universe implied a God, what evidence would there be that he was righteous? Certainly none in observed phenomena. Righteousness is a human concept denoting regard for rules of behaviour which conduce to the survival and happiness of the society which lives by them. There is not a shred of evidence that the universe as a whole is governed by such rules, or even that the earth is. Tennyson, in spite of his strong "will to

believe," is forced to admit the incompatibility between the goodness of God and the facts of nature.

Are God and Nature then at strife,
That Nature lends such evil dreams?
So careful of the type she seems,
So careless of the single life;

That I, considering everywhere
Her secret meaning in her deeds,
And finding that of fifty seeds
She often brings but one to bear,

I falter where I firmly trod,
And falling with my weight of cares
Upon the great world's altar-stairs
That slope thro' darkness up to God,

I stretch lame hands of faith, and grope,
And gather dust and chaff, and call
To what I feel is Lord of all,
And faintly trust the larger hope.

"So careful of the type?" but no.
From scarp'd cliff and quarried stone
She cries, "A thousand types are gone:
I care for nothing, all shall go.

"Thou makest thine appeal to me:
I bring to life, I bring to death:
The spirit does but mean the breath:
I know no more." And he, shall he,

Man, her last work, who seem'd so fair,
Such splendid purpose in his eyes,
Who roll'd the psalm to wintry skies,
Who built him fanes of fruitless prayer,

Who trusted God was love indeed
And love Creation's final law—
Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw
With ravine, shriek'd against his creed—

Who loved, who suffer'd countless ills,
Who battled for the True, the Just,
Be blown about the desert dust,
Or seal'd within the iron hills?

Tennyson came of a clerical family and was more of an artist than a thinker. To him the record of the rocks was a message of despair. But to us, grim and bloody though the story of evolution by natural selection in the struggle for existence may seem,

it is some consolation that we need not regard it as the product of "the righteous will of the living God," or of any will at all apart from the wills—in so far as they possess them—of the living beings engaged in the struggle.

One result of wholeheartedly accepting evolution and, in consequence, rejecting Theism is that we are freed from any necessity to account for the "historical process going wrong." For a thing to go wrong, it must possess some normal function which on a stated occasion it fails to fulfil. The Theist, who regards the world as planned by a good God, can speak of it as having gone wrong, though how the plan of an omnipotent being could go wrong he will find it hard to say. The Atheist, who does not regard the world as planned at all, cannot correctly speak of it as going wrong. For the Theist there is a problem of evil, for the Atheist none.

Since man was evolved in the struggle for existence, and the struggle for existence is evil—i.e. painful to the participants in it—the fact that "man tends from birth to be self-centred and prone to choose evil," i.e. to inflict pain on his fellow-creatures, needs no special explanation. To state it is merely to say that man is a living being with the common characteristics of all living beings. But it is not the whole truth about man. Human life is no Hobbist "war of all against all." Had it been so, man—an animal with a gestatory period of nine months, who needs fifteen or sixteen years to reach maturity and is ill-equipped with natural weapons—would never have survived in the struggle. Since man was man he has been nurtured in communities practising mutual aid. The primitive clan, the savage tribe, the ancient city-state, and the modern nation-state have been as vital factors in human development as the struggle for existence has been. To represent man as unable by his own efforts to transcend his self-centredness and pursue the common good of his group is a grotesque travesty of fact. He cannot indeed free himself entirely from his animal instincts. It is undesirable that he should; they are essential to the life of the individual and the species. But all training and education and all social life consist in subordinating and disciplining these instincts. To those who say that it cannot be done by human effort, that it requires some

kind of Divine intervention from without, civilization itself is the answer. The whole technical achievement of man from the primitive potter's wheel to the internal-combustion engine, the whole artistic achievement of man from the cave-drawings of the Stone Age to the plays of Shakespeare and the music of Beethoven, the whole scientific achievement of man from Babylonian star-lore to the generalizations of Newton and Einstein, are the answer.

It is the fashion among our modern defeatists to say that man's scientific achievement has outrun his moral development, and that unless we can discipline our selfishness and become new creatures, we had better call a "scientific holiday" and close our laboratories lest they destroy us. This is to misapprehend the problem. It is not man's self-centredness that is the enemy to-day. The conscript robots whom Hitler and Mussolini have let loose on long-suffering Europe, the airmen who drop death and terror from the skies, the secret police who murder and torture in concentration camps, are not self-centred men. They are much worse. They are men whose whole training and education, whose whole moral sense has been deliberately perverted, and who have been turned into unthinking instruments of an aggressive State machine. In what they do they are not conscious of sin; they are conscious of duty done. There is no evidence that even Hitler and Mussolini in private life are exceptionally selfish men; but in their public life they are fanatics. Probably each is completely justified in his own estimation. Tirades against selfishness will not help us here. We are not fighting this war against selfishness; we are fighting it against a false religion. The tragedy of human life is not the conflict between right and wrong, but the conflict between right and right. When our Church leaders have marked, learnt, and inwardly digested that vital saying of Hegel and applied it to contemporary history, they will be one step nearer to understanding what is wrong with the world.

III.—HISTORY AND THE CHRIST MYTH

WHAT ground is there for thinking that "God took hold of human history and individual human lives in a new way in the great act

of the Incarnation"? What ground is there for thinking that the Incarnation took place at all?

I am not one of those who follow Dupuis, Volney, Bruno Bauer, Brandes, Couchoud, Drews, Dujardin, Kalthoff, J. M. Robertson, Rylands, W. B. Smith, and Whittaker in denying that any historical figure underlies the picture of Jesus in the Gospels. But I have no hesitation in saying that "God the Son," who became man—"perfectly human, yet without sin or self-centredness,"—who bore on the cross "the full burden of the evil consequences" of sin; and who was raised by God from the dead, is a myth.

The Incarnation, sinlessness, expiatory death, and miraculous resurrection of Jesus Christ rest on the testimony of the Gospels and other writings which compose the New Testament. What claim have these writings to be accepted as evidence of events which would be unique in human history? The Gospels are anonymous documents; their traditional authorship is attested by no authority earlier than the second century, and (if we except one ambiguous reference to Matthew and Mark, cited from Papias by Eusebius) the second half of that century. Internal evidence shows them to be composite documents, not the first-hand reports of eye-witnesses. On any showing they are partisan documents; except for one bald statement of Tacitus that Christ was executed by Pontius Pilate, and one or two disparaging allusions by later writers, the Gospel story is uncorroborated by any non-Christian author. Contemporary confirmation is wholly absent. Well might Gibbon exclaim on "the supine inattention of the Pagan and philosophic world to those evidences which were represented by the hand of Omnipotence, not to their reason, but to their senses!" It is on the testimony of documents composed by Christians for the purposes of propaganda, and unchecked by any independent authority, that we are invited to rely for a credible account of the origin of Christianity. Would our Church leaders accept an account of the origin of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, or Shintoism which was as one-sided and uncorroborated as this?

And to what are these anonymous and partisan documents supposed to testify? To a life "perfectly human, yet without

sin or self-centredness." Before going further we may be pardoned for asking whether such a monstrosity as a being without sin or self-centredness would be perfectly human. What the Church calls "sin" is the manifestation of those animal instincts which, as has been pointed out, are essential to the life of the individual and the species, but which under necessarily imperfect social discipline are apt to get out of hand, with occasionally disastrous results. It is a moot point whether an individual who never, so to speak, "let himself go" would be perfectly human. Even if we accept the testimony of the Gospels that Jesus was without sin, it is permissible to ask in all reverence whether a little of the missing ingredient would not have made him more likeable. A preacher who publicly announces that he is "meek and lowly in heart" thereby invites the comment that he is neither—that, on the contrary, he appears to have an uncommonly good conceit of himself.

The question of the origins of Christianity is one for the historian, and must be investigated in accordance with the usual canons of historical evidence. The historian must approach his task without theological or metaphysical presuppositions. It will not do to start by tacitly assuming that God became man, and then to review the evidence on the basis of that assumption. That is the method of Christian historians. It is not honest history. We know absolutely nothing about God, and absolutely nothing about God becoming man. We know, however, something of human history. We know how the empires of antiquity arose; we know the structure of ancient society, especially under the Roman Empire; we know the tension that existed between the exploiters of the ancient world and the exploited masses; and we can trace from a great many indications how that tension translated itself into terms of religion.

The nature of religion in ancient society is well known to all who have studied the works of such authorities as Frazer and Jane Harrison. The ideology of the primitive clan or tribe revolves round the business of maintaining and propagating life, or, in two words, round food and sex. Religion originates from magical practices directed to increase food and fertility. The medicine-men who profess to understand these are the prototypes

of the priests and kings of later ages, and in course of time develop into the first ruling class in history. Such were the priest-kings of Babylonia, the Pharaohs of Egypt, and the early emperors of China. As savagery evolves into early civilization and class society crystallizes (the priestly hierarchy, with the king at its head, resting on the labour of peasants, craftsmen, and slaves captured in war) the magic or *mana* credited to natural objects or forces becomes personified in gods and goddesses (a supernatural hierarchy answering to the natural hierarchy which suggested it). In particular the fertile earth, mother of all living things, becomes personified in a mother-goddess (Isis, Ishtar, Cybele, Semele, Demeter), and the corn and wine and wild life to which she gives birth become personified in a son or lover (Osiris, Tammuz, Attis, Dionysus) who at regular intervals dies a violent death and rises again to newness of life.

The original "God the Son," therefore, is not the Christ who became incarnate in Judaea and suffered under Pontius Pilate, but a far older figure—a projection of the annual hopes and fears of primitive people who saw their food supply wane in winter and waited anxiously for its revival in spring. Of this ancient saviour it could be said with truth that he was the bread of life, that his flesh was meat indeed and his blood was drink indeed, and that his body and blood preserved unto everlasting life, not the individual, but the clan or tribe who partook of them.

In the last millennia before the Christian era the struggle for existence, which had always conditioned man's individual and social development, took the form of a struggle for survival between great empires which had arisen through the coalition or forcible subjection of city-states. Western Asia fell under the domination in turn of Sumeria, Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, Macedonia, and Rome. In every such conquest cities were sacked, populations massacred or carried off into slavery, lands resettled, old gods and goddesses discredited, and new ones elevated. Can we wonder if, among peoples uprooted from their own lands and imported as slaves into alien surroundings to labour for alien masters, religion took on a new, mystical colour; if life came to be felt as a penance, and the body as a prison; and if the quest thenceforth was no longer for a saviour to per-

petuate social life on earth, but for one who should redeem his elect from this world of oppression and evil, and preserve them to everlasting life hereafter?

We know, in fact, that in Egypt Osiris, originally a vegetation god, became in historical times the ruler and judge of the dead who could confer eternal life on his worshippers, and that in Greece Dionysus, a god of similar origin, was in the mysteries regarded as a revealer of immortality. Both Osiris and Dionysus, however, and later on Mithra, were too mixed up with the official cults of the Mediterranean world to be permanently satisfying as gods of the oppressed and enslaved. The way was thus open first to Jewish and later to Christian propaganda.

The Jewish dream of the Messiah or Christ—the “anointed one” who was to avenge the wrongs of God’s people on the mighty of the earth and inaugurate a millennium of peace and plenty—naturally attracted many of the dispossessed classes in the Roman Empire and tended to fuse with the already familiar theme of the saviour-god triumphant through suffering. These two factors, together with the slump in Jewish proselytism after the repression of the national revolts against Rome, amply account for the rise and spread of Christianity. There are certain indications that the career of an actual Jewish Messiah crucified by Pilate was used as a peg on which to hang a mass of myth drawn from other sources. If so, the real facts have been carefully edited or suppressed. To write as if the Gospels recorded the indisputable “history” of the life and death of Jesus, and to ignore the research put into the subject not only by mythicists but by opponents of the myth theory such as Schweitzer, Loisy, and Guignebert, is to poison the wells of public information.

Christianity, though it originated as a religion of the slave and the outcast, soon ceased to be so; and with its adoption by Constantine as the religion of the Roman Empire it became the powerful vested interest which it still is. To speak of the Christian Church of the fourth and later centuries as “a creative centre of righteousness” is an outrage on historical truth.

What are the facts? The decay of the Roman Empire, which began from economic causes in the second century and became

manifest in the third, was not due to Christianity; but it made the victory of Christianity possible. The tough soldier-emperors who tried to hold the Empire together in its throes of dissolution needed a strong spiritual opium to drug the masses into submission to conditions that had become all but intolerable, and, after experimenting with Mithraism, they finally found it in Christianity. The pagan Empire had been rotten and ripe for destruction. The Christian Empire remained rotten and was duly destroyed. Slavery, serfdom, despotism, cruelty, cultural decay, and gross superstition had been features of the pagan Empire, and remained features of the Christian Empire. The only difference was that the Catholic hierarchy, from officials of a suspected and sometimes persecuted sect, became part of the government machinery, acquired privilege, power, and wealth, and after the disintegration of the Empire came to be the dominant element in the ruling class of feudal Europe. The superstitions of paganism took on a new lease of life under a change of name. Saints and martyrs filled the places of the old gods; "Our Lady" assumed the attributes of Isis and other ancient mother-goddesses; and the trade in fraudulent relics became one of the flourishing industries of the Middle Ages. The kingdom of God for which prophets had thundered and zealots had bled was metamorphosed into a vast international racket run for the profit of the religious orders, the princes of the Church, and the Papacy—"the ghost," as Hobbes truly said, "of the deceased Roman Empire, sitting crowned upon the grave thereof." How this "creative centre of righteousness" defended its privileges, its power, and its wealth against the attacks of the unprivileged, the history of the Albigensian crusade, the Inquisition, and the statute *De Haeretico Comburendo* bears ghastly witness.

IV.—RELIGION AND RIGHTEOUSNESS

WHAT ground is there for thinking that "God, who as Spirit is ever active among men—speaking to them in all ages through their consciences and most specially through the prophets of Israel—is now known in all his fulness only in the experience of those whose hearts are open to his love in Christ; that is, those

who are brought into the movement of God's new creative work in history, which is the fellowship of Christ's disciples and is called the Church " ?

We can divide this sentence into three distinct propositions.

1. God speaks to men in all ages through their consciences.
2. God spoke to men " most specially " (i.e., more clearly than elsewhere and at other times) through the Hebrew prophets.
3. God is known in all his fulness only in the experience of members of the Christian Church.

1. If God speaks to men in all ages through their consciences, it is remarkable that the dictates of conscience in different societies, and even in different individuals of the same society, should be so various. Certain features, it is true, must in the nature of the case characterize all moral codes—the duty, for example, to abstain from specified forms of mutual injury and to render specified forms of mutual aid. But this is the barest outline. The manner in which it is filled in differs from one society to another and from one group to another within a given society.

The obligations of primitive man are as a rule restricted to members of his clan or tribe. Outside the tribe he may, and indeed is expected to, indulge in head-hunting, cannibalism, and similar practices. Inside the tribe, on the other hand, he is surrounded by taboos (for example, in the matter of exogamy and totemism) which to civilized people seem extraordinary and unaccountable, but to him are sacred obligations. The Hebrews of the Old Testament held it meritorious to exterminate Canaanites or Amalekites, but among themselves observed a relatively high standard of behaviour, together with a multitude of ritual and dietary taboos which strike us as irrational and meaningless. The Greeks of the Homeric age and the Vikings of the Dark Ages sang the praises of piracy and pillage, but were comparatively civilized in the domestic circle.

In every society the economic relations on which it rests are, on the whole, taken for granted and approved. The loftiest thinkers of the ancient world justified the institution of slavery; and Cato, the sternest of Roman moralists, exhibits the most callous attitude to his human chattels. Medieval Churchmen

clung tenaciously to the feudal serfdom on which the great religious orders depended for their wealth and ease. The evils of wage-slavery at the worst period of the Industrial Revolution found complacent apologists in men of light and leading at that time. Wilberforce, the protagonist of the fight against the negro slave trade, had no sympathy to spare for the sweated mill-hands of his native Yorkshire, and he supported the Combination Laws on the ground that the legalization of trade unions would lead to a dangerous rise in wages. Down to our own day it has been broadly true, as Karl Marx said, that the Church of England would more readily pardon attacks upon its Thirty-nine Articles than upon one thirty-ninth part of its income. In very recent years we have seen influential and presumably conscientious Englishmen condoning the vilest brutalities of Mussolini and Hitler on the ground that those dictators had saved their countries from Bolshevism, and persisting in that condonation right up to the beginning of the present war—when it ceased to be expedient.

The question of war itself has been the subject of the most contradictory pronouncements, all equally conscientious. In primitive society all wars in which the tribe engages are *ipso facto* just to all members of the tribe. In the ancient world, at times of acute class cleavage within the city-state, it began to be felt that a war might not be a good thing equally for all classes of society; thus in the comedies of Aristophanes we find the poet voicing the grievances of the agricultural interest and demanding an end to a war which benefited only the profiteers and the townsmen. This is not yet a conscientious objection to war as such. That seems to have gradually developed as the growing strength first of the Macedonian and then of the Roman Empire made any armed resistance to them by subject peoples and classes increasingly hopeless. There is no question that the early Christians, until the time of Constantine, were preponderantly pacifists; and conscientious objectors to war to-day, who take their stand on religious grounds, quite consistently appeal to the letter of the New Testament. The great majority of us, however, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, do not regard the Gospel commands, "Resist not him that is evil" and "Love your enemies," as good reasons for refusing service

in war; and in so thinking we are just as conscientious as the pacifist.

Conscience, in fact, so far from being the voice of God, is a function varying with the age, country, and social class in which we are born and bred, the education we receive, the friends we make, the books we read, and the critical faculties we exercise. Sir Richard Burton hardly put it too strongly when he wrote :

There is no good, there is no bad ; these be the whims of mortal will :
What works me weal, that call I good ; what hurts and harms, I hold
as ill.

They change with race, they shift with space, and in the veriest span
of time

Each wrong has worn a virtue's crown, each right been banned as sin
or crime.

2. Is there any ground for thinking that the authors of the prophetic books of the Old Testament were in any sense uniquely inspired by God ?

Let us grant at the outset the interest and value of that literature as poetry, and as a record of the reaction of sensitive and intelligent minds to the social and political cataclysms that rocked ancient society during the last few centuries before the Christian era. Some of the prophets have a noble passion for social justice; some express with a moving pathos their grief at the catastrophes of their nation; some lash the superstitions of polytheism with a scorn worthy of a Freethinker. But what evidence is there of any insight into human affairs not to be paralleled elsewhere ?

The writings of the Hebrew prophets had the good fortune to be preserved by the Jews and later by the Christians for a reason that had nothing to do with their real merits. They were supposed to have testified in advance to the advent of the Messiah, identified by the Christians with Jesus Christ. Many passages once generally regarded as of this nature are now admitted by all scholars to have no Messianic reference at all. Isaiah's alleged prophecy of the virgin birth rests on a mistranslation, and is shown by its context to refer wholly to contemporary politics. The poems on the suffering "servant of Jahveh" in the later chapters of Isaiah, once thought to be specific prophecies of the Passion, are now no longer regarded as Messianic; they

refer either to some forgotten individual of the writer's own period or (more likely) to the suffering Jewish people themselves. Those prophecies which are indisputably Messianic are connected with one or another of the movements for Jewish independence which occurred during the Persian and Macedonian periods, and are interesting only as monuments of the restless hopes of a better world which have always animated that sorely tried people.

There is no reason to think that such aspirations were peculiar to the Jews. By a historical accident their writings happen to have been preserved, while parallel manifestoes circulated among other ancient peoples, not being of interest to theologians, have perished. That other peoples produced analogous literature is certain. —We must remember that the classical authors whose works have come down to us represent almost exclusively the wealthy slave-owning and ruling classes of Greece and Rome. We have accounts by Thucydides and Xenophon of the wars and revolutions that ended the great age of Greece; but we have no version of the events from the plebeian or slave point of view. Yet we know from the satirical references of Aristophanes that prophecies of a good time coming circulated among the Athenian democracy. Similarly every public-school boy knows Cicero's version of the conspiracy of Catiline; but the hopes and fears of the obscure men who followed Catiline to the death have been forgotten. *Carent vate sacro*; any literature they had has perished.

Even taking classical literature as it is, we have every reason to reject the claim to unique nobility put forward on behalf of Jewish prophecy. We have the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus with its picture of the consequences of sin and its lesson of wisdom learnt by suffering. We have the *Antigone* of Sophocles with its appeal from the law of the city-state to the older law of clan-solidarity. We have the tragedies of Euripides with their exposure of the established injustices of Greek society. We have the *Apology* of Socrates, as reported by Plato, with its defence of free enquiry and its simple agnosticism about a hereafter. We have the poem of Lucretius with its denunciation of superstition and its philosophic contempt for death. These, equally with Hebrew literature, are part of the cultural heritage of mankind.

Why must we suppose that God spoke to men through the one set of writings rather than through the other? Why may we not hold that the human spirit, hammered into self-consciousness by millennia of struggle against natural environment and against the foes of its own household, was equally capable of producing both?

3. Is there any ground for thinking that the Christian Church possesses, or at any time possessed, a peculiar knowledge of the mind of God?

Something was said about this claim of the Church at the end of the last chapter. As Protestants, the authors of the statement before us may, if they like, repudiate any responsibility for the record of the Roman Church. Dr. Temple, however, can hardly repudiate his predecessors in the see of Canterbury. I shall therefore confine my attention to English Church history since the Reformation.

Whether the Anglican Church is a "redeemed society" or not is open to debate. What is certain is that the Church as a corporate body independent of Rome is the creation of the Parliaments of Henry VIII and Elizabeth. The Elizabethan settlement of religion was imposed by the deprivation of all the existing bishops except one, the imprisonment of some, the exile of others, and the ejection of a number of the lower clergy. The use of the English liturgy was enforced by law; failure to attend service was punished by fines; and after the Pope had excommunicated Elizabeth, anyone saying or hearing the Latin Mass was declared by Act of Parliament to be guilty of high treason. If that was not a revolution in religion, I do not know what is.

At the same time, anyone who wished to carry the Reformation further than Elizabeth and her advisers was liable to dire penalties. In 1579 Matthew Hamont was condemned by the Bishop of Norwich for denying the divinity of Christ and the truth of the New Testament, and after his ears had been cut off was burnt alive in the castle ditch. Other executions for similar views followed. Thus the Church of England, like the Church of Rome, was watered with the blood of heretics. Under James I Bartholomew Legate and Edward Wightman were burnt for denying the

Trinity; and it is noteworthy that Laud, afterwards Archbishop of Canterbury, was active in the proceedings against Wightman.

The Church of England, administered by bishops who were royal nominees, was in fact an excellent instrument in the hands of the Tudors and Stuarts (and the new aristocracy enriched by them) for discouraging "dangerous thoughts" among the middle and lower classes. When autocracy crashed, the Church of England (like the Orthodox Church of Russia in similar circumstances in our own day) inevitably went down with it. The only party in the seventeenth century who stood for unlimited religious liberty were the Levellers; and their sole supporter in Parliament was the Freethinker, Republican, and regicide, Henry Marten.

The bishops were restored to their former power and dignity after the Restoration, only to have to swallow the bitter pill of toleration at the Whig Revolution of 1688. Thereafter the Church of England fell into a condition of comfortable coma, but awoke with a shock under the impact of the French Revolution. That event frightened the wealthier classes out of the Deism fashionable throughout the eighteenth century, and convinced them of the necessity of supernatural beliefs as a bulwark of the social order. The result was the Evangelical movement, whose leading ornament, Wilberforce, was as insensitive to the horrors of the Industrial Revolution as he was sensitive to those of the slave trade.

It may safely be said that every movement for the betterment of the condition of the people in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries has originated outside, not inside the Church. Robert Owen, the initiator of factory reform and popular education, rejected all existing religions and relied on good environment to produce good citizens. In 1807 a Bill was introduced into Parliament by Whitbread for establishing elementary schools at the cost of the rates; the House of Commons whittled it down and the House of Lords, on the motion of Lord Chancellor Eldon and Manners-Sutton, Archbishop of Canterbury, rejected it outright. To forestall such dangerous measures, Manners-Sutton and others founded, in 1811, the National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the

Established Church. In 1810 Romilly introduced a Bill to abolish the death penalty for shoplifting. The House of Lords rejected it, Manners-Sutton and six other bishops voting in the majority. In 1813 Romilly tried again; his Bill was again rejected by the Upper House, five bishops voting against it. Bear in mind that at that time boys of fourteen were actually being hanged for theft, and draw your own conclusions.

I am not forgetting the Christian Socialist movement of the middle and late nineteenth century, and the notable part played by some clergy (albeit a minority) to-day on the side of the people. I give the present Archbishop credit for being more enlightened than any of his predecessors. But before we accept the Church's claim to be "a creative centre of righteousness" and a "redeemed society," possessed of a full knowledge of God denied to those outside her portals, we are surely entitled to demand that the Church shall corporately do penance for her abominable past and show a decent recognition of the work of those who laboured for righteousness in the teeth of her opposition and, when she had the power, her persecution.

V.—MAN HIS OWN MASTER

SINCE we have no reason to believe that the world was created by a righteous God, or that that God became man in the person of Jesus Christ, or that that God has vested peculiar moral authority in the Christian Church, it follows that we reject the claim of Dr. Temple and Dr. Whale that the good life can be lived effectively only within the "redeemed order" of the Church. Similarly we reject the doctrine that our mortal life is a preparation for an "eternal life" in which God will achieve final victory and all riddles will be solved. The sole ground for belief in an eternal life would be a Divine revelation imparted through some authority recognized as infallible. The Roman Catholic Church claims to be that authority. But Dr. Temple and Dr. Whale do not admit her claims and do not, so far as I understand, profess to set up any alternative authority. Their whole position seems to rest in the last resort on their personal "We believe" and on that full knowledge of God which they declare to be the peculiar

possession of members of the Church. Such a circular argument will convince nobody who is not antecedently disposed to swallow it whole.

Nevertheless it would be a great mistake to underestimate the strength of the Church's position. That strength is not logical, but psychological. It resides, not in the demonstrability of the Church's doctrine, but in the nature of the human need which that doctrine is put forward to meet. That need can be shortly summed up thus: Something is wrong with the world; we need an explanation and a remedy; and the Church claims to supply the explanation and the remedy.

The record of the Church, as I have shown, is not calculated to inspire confidence in either her explanation or her remedy. What of her diagnosis? If that is erroneous, it is not surprising that her explanation should be a myth and her remedy a quack medicine. I hope to show now that her diagnosis is erroneous.

According to Dr. Temple and Dr. Whale the trouble with the world is that we are selfish and self-centred, do not love our neighbours as ourselves, and do not see in our fellow-man the "brother for whom Christ died." If, they contend, we conformed to this rule and made love of our neighbour the rule of all our actions, God's purpose would be fulfilled and the problems of the world solved.

I contend that this diagnosis is false. The present condition of the world, with its exploitation, its class conflicts, its international conflicts, its mass-hatred, its mass-murder, and its mass-torture, is not due to individual selfishness and will not be altered one jot by preaching against individual selfishness. To imagine that it can be affected by such preaching is to imagine that a destructive tidal wave can be arrested by baling out the ocean with a bucket. The present condition of the world is due to conflicting economic interests, conflicting political interests, and conflicting loyalties rooted in those interests. To love our neighbours as ourselves may be good or bad advice, but as a prescription for this state of things it is simply irrelevant. I give Dr. Temple credit for intelligence, and I do not believe that at bottom he is deceived by the nonsense which his position obliges him to utter. I do not believe that Dr. Temple loves Hitler and Mussolini as himself

any more than I do; I do not believe that Dr. Temple *could* love Hitler or Mussolini as himself; and I do not believe that Dr. Temple really thinks he *ought* to love Hitler or Mussolini as himself.

Let us be clear. It is not the selfishness or self-centredness of individual men and women which has brought about this state of the world. It was not the selfishness or self-centredness of the individual German, Italian, or Japanese which led to the invasion of Poland, Norway, the Netherlands, France, Greece, Yugoslavia, and Russia, or to the attack on Pearl Harbour. Still less was it the selfishness or self-centredness of the individual Briton, Russian, American, or Chinese which led to the resistance of their countries to attack. To state such a proposition is to refute it. German soldiers are in occupied Europe to-day not because they are selfish, but because they are obedient and loyal to the Nazi régime. British, Russian, and American soldiers are fighting them in Europe and Africa because they too are obedient and loyal to their respective Governments. In deciding which is the false obedience and which the true, which the false loyalty and which the true, the criterion of selfishness and unselfishness will not help us forward an inch. We must make another approach to the question—the approach of history.

Let us begin by going back to our starting-point—the revolutionary overthrow at the Reformation of the Catholic hierarchy which had dominated and exploited Europe for a thousand years, and the accompanying repudiation of authority which (though few saw this at the time) was to know no halting-place short of modern scientific Materialism. After the Reformation came the age of Galileo, Descartes, Spinoza, and Newton. Science became the ally of industry and commerce; and more and more thinking men began to realize that man was his own master, free to shape his own destiny without reference to those gods in the skies who were merely the reflections of his own ignorance and impotence on earth. This new age of confidence reached its first culmination in the eighteenth century, when the Encyclopaedists turned Materialism into a revolutionary theory and provided the intellectual weapons for the men who swept away European feudalism between 1789 and 1815.

The eighteenth century made promises of freedom, equality,

and brotherhood which it was unable to fulfil. That was not because those promises are inherently unfulfillable, nor because the French Revolutionists were too selfish and self-centred to fulfil them (they showed, on the contrary, a reckless spirit of self-sacrifice and were just as willing to face death for their cause as they were to inflict it). It was because they did not understand the conflict of economic interests which stood in the way of the fulfilment of those promises. A conflict of economic interests is not necessarily indicative of selfishness in the persons concerned. Individually they may be and often are model husbands and fathers, good neighbours, and self-sacrificing patriots. The struggle between capital and labour, for example, is not due to individual selfishness and cannot be ended by individual unselfishness. Even more evidently the struggle between nation and nation is not due to individual selfishness and cannot be ended by individual unselfishness. Both are conflicts, not between right and wrong, but between right and right—a kind of conflict which the Greek tragedians understood better than the Hebrew prophets.

To understand the nature of such conflicts demands a philosophy of right different from that implicit in Christianity. We must recognize that ideas of right and wrong, truth and falsehood are as dependent on external conditions of life and as subject to change with changing conditions as we know organic form and function to be. I do not mean to say that we have no criterion by which to decide between one ideology and another. In the last resort, right behaviour means that which conduces to the survival and happiness of the society which practises it; and in defining it we have to take account of conditions as they are to-day, not as they were a hundred, a thousand, or ten thousand years ago. We live in a world to which science, industry, and commerce have given a unity which it did not possess in antiquity, in the Middle Ages, or even in the early nineteenth century. Our criterion of right and wrong must be one applicable to such a world. The romanticists who try to behave according to the standards of ancient Rome or the primeval forest may think themselves high-souled patriots, but they are a more appalling nuisance than any merely selfish individual can possibly be.

The criterion of adjudication between parties in a civil or international struggle is therefore not : " Which is the selfish and which the unselfish party ? " but : " Which represents a social order, a morality, and a philosophy of life adapted to the modern world as science, industry, and commerce have made it ; and which represents a social order, a morality, and a philosophy of life left over from the age of robber barons, serfdom, and superstition—perhaps even from the age of head-hunting, cannibalism, and medicine-men ? " The remedy for the present evil condition of the world is not the preaching of unselfishness and the roping of all and sundry into a Church whose credentials as a " creative centre of righteousness " are in the highest degree doubtful, but the fighting out to a finish, without truce, parley, or appeasement, of the war against those national and international elements who would drag us back to the era of the robber baron and the head-hunter. By carrying that war to victory we shall change not only our environment, but ourselves, and shall become fitter to build a world order worthy of the technical, artistic, and scientific achievements of man.

In the struggle for a better civilization we need every possible ally both inside and outside the Churches. Personally I agree with Professor J. B. S. Haldane* that if individuals are assisted by religious symbolism to do their bit in building and fighting for a better civilization, such symbolism is justified. I would place it on a level with poetry, music, and drama. But I further agree with Professor Haldane that if symbolism is mistaken for a statement of fact and leads people to a false idea of the history of the world in which they live and of the causes of its present state, such falsehood is a bad thing for them and for us. We should therefore be careful to remember that our symbolism is only symbolism, and we should be clear as to what it symbolizes. If some people find religious symbolism useful to express the truth that they are part of a whole (humanity) larger and more enduring than themselves, that in it they live and move and have their being, and that in battle for that whole against those survivals of the past which arrest its development lies their perfect freedom, then good luck to them. But those who use

* In *The Rationalist Annual*, 1943.

such symbolism to spread a false notion of man's place in the universe, a false history of the past, and a false diagnosis of present maladjustments do no service to the building of a better order, but confuse our counsel, weaken our hands, and wittingly or unwittingly delay our victory.

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